

## Black Single Parent Families:Coping and Functioning

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The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between stress-coping patterns (use of informal support, formal support) and the functioning (problematic, nonproblematic, total) of Black single-parent families. The study was exploratory in nature and was designed to provide information on significant variables related to the level of functioning of Black single-parent families, the relationship between variables, and establish the basis for testing of hypotheses related to single-parent functioning. Major variables in the study were derived from a review of the literature. Stress, coping patterns, sex and socio-economic status as independent variables accounted for 16% of the variation in the dependent variable, family functioning. However, a significant relationship between socio-economic status and nonproblematic functioning was found. The relationship between coping patterns (use of formal support) by functioning (problematic) and sex by functioning (total) were approaching significance and with a larger sample might prove to be significant.

Within Black life, the most crucial unit is the family. The Black family has developed a structure to meet its needs (Hays & Mindel, 1975). Moreover, for functional purposes, roles within the Black family have always been flexible (Hill, 1972). Black women often shared the traditional male-designated roles; similarly, Black men shared the traditional female-designated roles. Whatever was functional for familial survival was done, and whoever was available did it. The role interchanging and assumed dual roles in the single-parent family are accepted patterns of Black life (McCrory, 1980). Therefore, the single-parent family, which is not a new phenomenon, is one of several typical family forms. The notion of the nuclear family (husband, wife, and children) as the ideal type of American family is an illusion for many Americans (Birdwhistall, 1970).

The single-parent family is as old as the two-parent family, yet it is erroneously viewed as dysfunctional. Categorization of the single-parent family as a social problem rests on three assumptions:

1. The vulnerability to economic dependence, especially when a woman is the single parent.

2. The potential deleterious effects on the children's psychosocial development.
3. The stability threat to the socioeconomic structure predicated on the basic two-parent family tradition (Billingsley & Giovanni, 1971).

Glasser and Navarre (1970) predict problems for the single-parent; but Billingsley and Giovanni (1971) state that many one-parent families function well and that:

The unfortunate assumption that there is a one-to-one relationship between this type of family structure and all kinds of social and psychological pathology has resulted in almost total ignorance about these families, the majority of whom somehow have circumvented this "inevitable pathology" (p. 368).

Since 1960, Black female single-parent families have grown nearly ten times faster than Black two-parent families (Snapper & Ohms, 1978). This change is dramatic because from the time of slavery through 1960, Black single parents never exceeded 25% (Gutman, 1976). During slavery, however, even though a significant number of involuntary marital break-ups occurred, large numbers of slave couples lived in long marriages; and most lived in two-parent families (Gutman, 1976). This trend is documented by the U.S. Department of Commerce (1980) which reported that in 1950 husband and wife comprised 77.7% of Black families; but by 1960 the number dropped to 73.6%; to 68.1% in 1970; and to 60.9% by 1975. It was also cited that Black single-parent families increased from 17.6% in 1950 to 22.4% in 1960, 28.3% in 1970, to 35.3% in 1975 and by 1980 was over 45%. The large number of single-parents is due primarily to the increase in the never married and marital disrupted (divorced and separated) categories. Black male single parents have varied slightly, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce (1980). In 1950 they comprised 4.7% of single-parent families; 4.0% in 1970; 3.9% by 1975 and 4.3% by 1980.

Single-parent families include children, so it follows that the number of children living with both parents has decreased drastically. For example, in 1960, 80% of all Black children lived with both parents; in contrast, 41.9% lived with mothers only in 1979 and 2.1% lived with fathers only (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1981). This translates to 1.8 Black million single-parent families in 1980 with 4.3 million Black children living in single-parent households. Of course, 95.7% of single-parent families were female-headed.

Researchers rarely mention the Black single-parent father but two perspectives of Black female single-parents are commonly described: the dominant matriarch (Moynihan, 1965) and the female who is the chief strength of the Black family functioning remarkably well in multiple roles of homemaker, child rearer, and breadwinner (Hill, 1972). Bilge

and Kaufman (1983) assert that the impoverished female-headed family often feels stigmatized on two counts since both the single-parent family and poverty are viewed as pathological and inferior in American society. They conclude that it is time to recognize the problems society causes for single-parent families rather than searching for the root of the problems within the family itself.

People depend upon systems for help in obtaining, material, emotional and opportunities to realize aspirations and to cope with life tasks (Pincus & Minaham, 1978). People find help from the informal network--family and friends -- and/or the formal network--services organized for those in need. According to Moynihan (1965), Blacks more often rely on welfare, a formal system; but Hill (1972) reports that three-fifths of Black single parents work. The State of Black American 1984 (McGhee, 1984) reports that 41% of female-heads of household in their sample were employed. Researchers (Billingsley, 1968, McAdoo, 1978) assert Black families cope by banding together to form a network of mutual aid and social interaction with neighbors and kin (an informal system). Involvement with the extended family as a coping mechanism operates at all economic levels for both one and two parent families (McAdoo, 1978). Urban poor Black parents who are single parents often manage with an extended family network (Ladner, 1970; Stack, 1974; and Heiss, 1975). While two-parent families comprise the basic family unit, those who are unmarried, divorced, or widowed are firmly intergrated into the kinship network (Gibson, 1979). The negative aspects of the mental health of Black females have been cited by Carrington (1980), and Pearlin and Johnson (1977). But all types of families have some problems and need some support. One chief characteristic defining the Black woman is the realistic approach to her own resources (Ladner, 1970). Instead of becoming resigned to her fate, she has always sought creative solutions to her problems. The ability to utilize existing resources and yet maintain a forthright determination to survive is one of her major attributes.

Different writers have outlined what is meant by family functions, which are defined as the general consequences of activities performed within the family. Functions are instrumental or expressive. Instrumental functions are those primarily concerned with relations of the group to the situation external to it, and expressive functions are those which are primarily concerned with the solidarity or harmony of the group (Parsons, 1974). Billingsley (1968) drawing from the work of Parsons and Bales (1955) reported that functions of the Black family are both instrumental (family stability and economic), expressive (provides security and companionship and generates a sense of belonging, self-worth, and dignity), and instrumental/expressive (socialization of children,

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child rearing). These functions are needs that should be met by the family for its members and by the community for the family and, to a greater extent, by the larger society for the community and the Black family.

Billingsley (1968) asserted that the extent to which Black families are able to meet their needs and societal requirements depends heavily upon the degree to which institutions of the wider society meet the needs of Black people in general and Black families in particular; and indicated that the extent to which a Black family functions adequately in protecting its children depends upon the social supports given by society. However, even among the lowest social classes in the Black community, families give children better care than is generally recognized.

Thus the purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between stress-coping patterns (use of informal support, formal support) and the functioning (problematic, nonproblematic, total) of Black single-parent families.

#### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework which served as the basis of this study is stress theory and social support theory. A discussion of these theories follows.

##### Stress Theory:

Seyle's (1956) research laid much of the foundation on which current physiological and psychological stress research is based. His definition of stress evolved from discovering the investigating the General Adaptation Syndrome. Stress is familiar to each of us because it is a normal part of living. However, single-parent families are often confronted with stress-producing circumstances. Stress comes from a Latin work meaning "to draw tight." When there's no outlet for this feeling of "tightness," stress can be harmful. It can be conceptualized as upsets in usual or desired behaviors, provoked by both internal and external stimuli forcing a reaction to any situation that is new, threatening or exciting. Stress prepares us to act. Seyle (1956) reported that the body manifests a pattern of physiological responses to a variety of stressors and this response is largely the same regardless of the nature of the stressor. The outcome of experiencing a stressor is dependent upon the individual's ability to meet adaptational demands made by the stressor. The existence of resources at levels in excess of demands allows for adaptation resulting in favorable outcomes. When demand exceeds resources, distress occurs. Chronic, unrelieved stress can cause serious physical and mental health problems because of physiological damage and sensitization to effects of future stressors through a reduction in the amount of adaptational energy available. Thus distress interferes with healthy functioning. Some stress is good, an important element of mental health. It provides an extra burst of

energy -- more adrenalin enters the bloodstream, heart and breathing rates increase, blood flow quickens and muscle strength improves. Harassing the energy of occasional stress can provide stimulation, motivation and growth production. When feeling in control, stress is beneficial (Curran 1985).

#### Social Support

Caplan (1974) proposed that support systems are social aggregates; namely, interactions with another individual, a network, a group, or an organization that provides individuals with opportunities for feedback about themselves and for validation of their expectations about others, which may offset deficiencies. In this framework social aggregates play the role of a cushion against disease. Personalizing relationships creates a buffer between the individual and the outside world.

Support may be intermittent, short-term, or continuing in nature. The following elements are inherent regardless; the significant others(s) (1) help mobilize psychological resources and master emotional burdens; (2) share tasks; and (3) provide extra supplies of money, materials, tools, skills and cognitive guidance to improve handling of situations. Persons most likely to be interested in giving support are those who have similar experiences or professional caregivers who are trying to raise health, social and/or psychological standards. Caregivers and caregiving are classified as informal support (which includes family groups) and organized or formal support (which includes caregiving professionals).

Informal caregivers give help through unskilled efforts, and there is a mutual and reciprocal quality in their interactions with the people they help. Organized support is offered through formal groups where people band together to offer services to those in need. It would include Parents Without Partners, the church, the public welfare system, mental health system, and housing services. Their services may be given by professionals or nonprofessionals.

Support is needed by all to function. It is evident that support received from caregivers, whether formal or informal, influences how well a single parent will survive in his/her environment.

#### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Research has shown that a variety of factors are associated with functioning of Black single-parent families. In this selective review, I will examine stress, single-parent family coping patterns and social networks.

#### Stress

Factors involved in the perception of an event as stressful have been the focus of studies such as Holmes and Masuda's (1970) research on stressful life events. Their research identified and ranked life events commonly perceived as stressful. Rahe (1974) and McGrath (1970) have

emphasized the role of cognitive and personality factors in the process through which events are perceived as stressful.

Psychological stress, a state of the total organism rather than an event in the environment, occurs in conditions of imbalance between perceived demand and perceived response capability (McGrath, 1970).

Poverty, unemployment, excessive or unwanted children, and marital problems are stressors. Letourneau (1981) investigated physically abusive and nonabusive mothers, and concluded that since many mothers apparently function adequately in the presence of high stress or inadequately even when experiencing low levels of stress, empathy and stress somehow interact and that empathy serves a mediating function

Taylor (1981) conceptualized stress as a social psychological phenomenon and thus is a function of perceived or anticipated threat or frustration, and that the effects of stress are mediated through subjective and external factors which influence future responses to stress. In view of this formulation, suggested that among Black males under stress, those who have a greater sense of control over occurrences in their lives will cope more effectively with stressful events than will those who feel powerless.

#### Single-Parent Family

The mere absence of one parent affects family functioning in a variety of ways since it places a heavier burden on the custody parent who must attend to both instrumental and expressive functions, and stigmatizes single parents which may significantly increase the burden but may not have negative effects on family functioning (Sprey, 1975).

Monaghan (1978) studied 60 single parents, 40 females and 20 males, and results indicated that management of multiple-role obligations, emotional involvement with the children, and effective leadership as family head determine quality of parenting, not the structure of the family itself. Monaghan concluded there was no empirical evidence to support the pathological view of the single-parent family; and classifying it as pathological was "biased, sexist, inaccurate, and overly simplistic" (p.3).

McAdoo (1981) researched 76 Black single mothers to examine the level of stress within the lives of single employed mothers of school-aged children from a diversity of economic levels. Findings indicated areas of stress as finances, housing, job related, male-female relations, health concerns, personal relations, parenting concerns, personal habits, and legal areas. Single parents were found to be under a tremendous amount of stress, yet many were coping very well. Those involved in help-exchange patterns with friends and relatives were coping better.

Ethnographic and theoretical literature on family, kinship, and child-bearing was reviewed by Bilge and Kaufman (1983). They focused on a

representative sample of societies of different degrees of sociocultural complexity and found that the single-parent family is no more detrimental to the well-being of children than any other family form. They reported that single-parent families occur among many peoples in varying frequencies. If large numbers of such families are encountered in any society or in one of its segments, they can be assumed to be an adaptation to regularly occurring social conditions. Whether the single-parent family becomes distressed depends upon the availability of sufficient material resources and supportive social networks and society's attitudes towards it. Additionally, when the single-parent family is combined with an extended network of concerned kin, it often provides more emotional support and offers more options to family members than an isolated nuclear family.

#### Coping Patterns

Blacks have developed their own strategies, coping or survival techniques for dealing with personal crises (Billingsley, 1968; Kirkpatrick, 1979). Psychosocial and sociocultural stress differentially affect individuals based on such factors as personal stress-coping styles; exposure to stress emanating from race and socioeconomic events in one's personal life; and existence of larger sociocultural factors that reduce the individual's ability to exercise control over his or her life, to act assertively, and to effectively express anger against legitimate targets (Smart, 1978). The kinship bond is most commonly practiced for the psychosocial welfare of the single parent, and this bond appears to be stronger among Black families (Hill, 1972).

The family help pattern of coping with stress is valuable (McAdoo, 1977). The prevalence of informal ties closely relates to daily needs, activities, and problems. Therefore, these ties are resourceful strategies and solutions to needs and problems, thus are coping mechanisms (Martineau, 1977).

Hendricks and associates (1981) investigated where urban Blacks would most likely go for help with a serious problem. They found that age, sex, and marital status were not significantly associated with sources of help; but women were more likely to seek help with a serious problem than men. When men did seek help, they were more likely to go to an informal source.

#### Social Networks

The modern network offers relationships in which meaningful social contacts and reciprocal aid for family development and for crises are available (Flomenhaft and Kaplan, 1968). The network often provides support that is unavailable from the community (McAdoo, 1978). Several studies have produced data about the importance of social networks.



Wellman et al (1973) studied 800 families in Toronto, Canada, and found that 80% had some social network available. These networks or circles of intimates provided the families with everyday and emergency support. Ponderhughes and Pittman (1985) reveal the empowerment aspect of social networks. Empowerment links individual strengths and competencies and natural helping systems ensuring that the problem-solving process itself counteracts negative valuations.

## METHODS

### Procedures

Participants in this study were purposively selected from a parent-child center, Parents Without Partners (Black Caucus), Big Brothers, a church group and a self-help project -- all social programs in Washington, D.C. It has been well documented that large numbers of social welfare clients, particularly in public agencies are Black, but I intentionally did not use that type of agency. To identify single-parent fathers who met the criteria it was necessary to use several programs. Criteria for selection of participants included being a Black single mother or father, 20 years of age or older, living in or using a social program in Washington, D.C. and having at least one child under the age of 14 who resided with her/him for some period of time.

The investigator contacted the head of each program from which participants were selected and obtained a list of names of potential participants. The potential participants were contacted to determine whether or not they met the selection requirements. The 65 single parents who met the criteria and were contacted were invited to participate in the study. Sixty-two, 30 fathers and 32 mothers agreed to participate.

Data on the participants revealed that two-thirds were previously married (42 out of 62); 50% had experienced a change in their marital status more than two years ago. Single parents who were previously married were in higher income levels. The largest number of males were divorced (37%) and females were never married (37%). The median age for the sample was 36 (over three-fourths of the participants were 31 years of age or older including one-fourth who were 41 years of age or older). The median income for the sample was \$26,333; for females, \$17,843; and for males \$35,116. The median income in the Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Areas was \$19,116 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1983). Over 50% of the males were in managerial or administrative positions whereas over 50% of the females were in clerical or unskilled positions. Almost one-half of the sample had obtained a college degree, and over one-half of the sample was in the middle class. Almost all the men received their total income from wages or salaries. Only seven (7) males had another source of income. Females, on the other hand, received their income from multiple sources although the largest proportion (82%) received part of their income from wages or salaries. The

62 participants had a total of 134 children. Over 70 percent of the participants were involved with an informal support network; however less than half (45% were involved with a formal network. Participants reported experiencing 0 to 28 stressful life events in the last year with 13 being the average number of events experienced. Recreational and educational services were presented as the two most needed ones by the respondents followed closely by financial, housing and emotional support services. The respondents (75%) were basically satisfied with their lives. Although satisfied, 68% indicated they preferred to be married. The single parents also considered their children well-adjusted with their family status but 50% indicated that children should have two parents. The lack of two parents (37%) and the responsibility of being a single parent (34%) were least valued; whereas the relationship with their child(ren) was most valued (36%) by the respondents.

The generalizability of this study is limited in terms of external validity; therefore, it is restricted in the generalizability of data to other groups of single-parent families. The sample was selected using purposive sampling. Moreover, the participants were from Washington, D.C., Metropolitan area, which has a high number of single-parent families (47,919 Black female-headed -- 88%; 6,667 male-headed single-parent families -- 12%; and 54,586 total single-parent families -- 46%) and a high income level for Blacks (\$19,329 median income) (Department of Commerce, 1982), which may not typify populations in other geographic areas. Additionally, single-parent fathers were overrepresented in the sample constituting almost 50% of the sample.

#### Instrumentation

The 98-item comprehensive questionnaire used in the study was developed based on the Hollingshed's Two-Factor Index of Social Position (to ascertain socio-economic status), a modification of the Holmes-Rahe Social Readjustment Rating Scale (to determine the level of stress), and an adaptation of the Jackson Family Functioning Scale (to measure the financial emotional and task level of family functioning). The instrument also included data on demographics.

#### DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The Gamma Coefficient was used to provide answers to research questions 1 through 4. The step-wise regression analysis answered research question 5.

The computational routine for gamma required the construction of bivariate tables for the dependent variable, family functioning (total, problematic, and nonproblematic functioning), and the group of independent variables, or control variables so that the column variable increases in value as one moves from left to right and the row variable increases as one moves from bottom to top. The variables were measured at the

ordinal level. Ordinal level variables have direction which range from "high" to low". Therefore, with ordinal variables, relationships can be either positive or negative.

Multiple regression analysis was used to determine the amount of variation in the dependent variable that is explained by each of the independent variables. Its purpose is to identify those factors most strongly associated with the dependent variable. The stepwise regression orders the variables according to their contribution to the dependent variable.

#### Research Questions

1. Is there a relationship between coping patterns (use of formal and informal support) and level of family functioning as measured by the Jackson Family Functioning Scale)?

To answer the question, family functioning measured at three levels, total, problematic, and nonproblematic, was compared with coping patterns measured at two levels, formal and informal, comprising seven (7) bivariate tables to determine their relationship. The analysis of the data using the gamma coefficient indicated that the level of family functioning was independent of coping patterns. (However, formal support by problematic functioning was approaching significance and a larger sample might change the outcome).

2. Do male and female single parents differ in their level of family functioning?

Family functioning assessed at three levels, total, problematic, and nonproblematic, were crosstabulated against sex, male and female, to determine the extent to which a relationship existed between the variables. While an examination of the gamma coefficient revealed that sex of single parents and level of family functioning were not related, it was approaching significance and with a larger sample could be significant.

3. To what extent does socio-economic status (SES), as measured by Hollingshead's Two-Factor Index of Social Position, influence family functioning for single-parent families?

Bivariate tables were constructed for each of the levels of family functioning, total, problematic, nonproblematic, and the control variable, socio-economic status. An examination of each of the gamma coefficients revealed that only non-

problematic functioning was influenced by the socio-economic status of single parent families (see Table 1). Because the coefficient is positive (+0.60), it can be concluded for these data that 33% more of those who were classed as lower socio-economic status scored "high" on problematic functioning than those of the middle class.

Table 1  
Socio-economic Status by Nonproblematic Functioning

Socio--economic Status	Nonproblematic Functioning					
	Low		High		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Middle	21	62	13	38	34	100.0
Lower	8	29	20	71	28	100.0
Total	29	47	33	53	62	100.0

4. What is the relationship between stress (as measured by the Holmes-Rahe Social Readjustment Rating Scale) and family functioning of single-parent families?

When the three levels of family functioning were compared to level of stress in bivariate tables, the gamma coefficient indicated that stress and family functioning were not significantly related.

5. What is the contribution of sex, socio-economic status, stress, and coping patterns (use of formal support, and informal support) to family functioning of single parent families?

A stepwise regression analysis was used to determine the most important independent variables associated with the dependent variable. Independent variables were sex, socio-economic status, stress, coping patterns (formal support), and coping patterns (informal support).

Regression analysis showed that there were three statistically significant factors associated with family functioning, the most important of which was sex, followed by stress, and then socio-economic status. These three independent variables accounted for 16% of the variance in the dependent variable (see Table 2).

Table 2  
Regression of Family Functioning on Sex, Stress,  
Socio-economic Status, and Coping Patterns (N = 62)

Dependent Variable:	Family functioning		
Independent Variable:	Coping patterns (formal support)		
	Coping patterns (informal support)		
	Sex		
	Stress		
	Socio--economic Status		
Independent Variable	F-Values	R Square	Beta
Coping patterns (Formal support)	3.85	.06	.19
Sex	3.57	.11	.25
Stress	3.37	.15	.19
Socio--economic	2.69	.16	-.10
Coping patterns (Informal support)	2.16	.16	.06

#### DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

Some of these findings were unexpected and inconsistent with other findings; whereas others were strikingly consistent. The inconsistent ones may be related to the age and income of the participants. Age, although not a control variable in this study, had a significant relationship to the research variables. Three-fourths of the participants were 31 years of age and older. The lower family functioning scores and lower education income levels were recorded by the younger respondents especially those 21-25 years of age. Also related to age was length of time in marital disrupted status and income. Although female single parents income was lower than male income, it was higher than other studies (McGhee 1984).

The events experienced as stressful were ranked as new close personal relationship, a change in social activities, and need to make a major decision in immediate future and a major change in finances as the most stressful events. Other studies (Curran, 1985, McAdoo, 1980) reported finances as most stressful.

Single parents in the study were receptive and cooperative. They responded with interest and made adjustments in their schedules to create time for the interview. Black men have been characterized as resistant to participation in research studies but many of the fathers indicated they wanted to participate because of the lack of information currently available on single fathering, the desire to share their experiences in hopes that they would help other single fathers, and the expectation that the results of this study would provide helpful information for the participants.

Consistent with other findings, (McAdoo, 1980; Martineau, 1977; Stack, 1974) the single parents were firmly enmeshed in a support network. The respondents were able to utilize informal and/or formal systems for help in coping with life's tasks. Caplan (1974), reported that people were dependent upon support systems which act as a buffer between them and the external world. Involvement with support networks empowers and empowerment enables use of available opportunities which was evidenced job promotions, communities, continued and developed relationships.

In Strengths of Black Families, Hill identified strong kinship bonds, work orientation, adaptability of family roles, tendency to seek achievements and religious orientation as factors in the coping ability of Black families. Black single parents demonstrated these strengths which may help to explain the lack of significant difference between single mothers and fathers.

Letourneau (1981) reported empathy and stress interact and that empathy serves a mediating function. The Black single parents revealed understanding was the most important support and used it to help cope with stress.

Moreover, in general the participants were healthy, satisfied with their lives, had sufficient income and a social network which indicated the existence of resources at levels in excess of demands that allowed the process of coping with stress.

#### Implications for Social Work Practice

Programs and policies developed by social workers should be based on the coping strategies of Black single-parent families and the understanding needed by single parents. Practitioners and policy makers need to cease viewing the single-parent family as a dysfunctional form and recognize that no single family form produces an optimal environment for a growing child. Moreover, no family type is more "natural" to the human

species than any other, since it is not the family form but the support system and the methods of socialization that may have the greater impact on children. When practitioners stop labeling the single-parent family as pathological, these families will not suffer from stigmatization but rather will feel supported by social services.

When therapy is needed, family network therapy or crisis intervention should be considered. Family network therapy would be an extension of their help-seeking behavior, thus would be less threatening and more ego-supportive. Crisis intervention is time-limited and operates at "turning" points. If the crisis is handled advantageously, growth and development for the family occurs.

Children's services are needed by single parents. Although the participants were older and had older children, educational and recreational services were needed most. Day care was needed by the younger respondents.

Furthermore, social workers should develop programs based on the knowledge that stress is inherent in modern living. However, with an adequate support system and material resources stress can be handled positively, hence, social workers need to be concerned about the development of neighborhood services which offer immediate services to prevent stress from becoming distress. These services would place an emphasis on prevention rather than treatment.

Finally, programs to benefit single parents should be supportive in nature. Many single parents, especially fathers, indicated that emotional support groups were needed. Self-help groups sponsored by the church or other neighborhood institutions would be helpful. The investigator suggests that parenting rather than mothering or fathering should be the focus.

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